

India's top law firms are lining up to hire and promote women leaders. Here's why.

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A sure way of ensuring more diversity at the top is hiring and promoting women to senior roles, firms have found. **(Mint)**

Summary

At some firms, women accounted for almost half the promotions to the role of partner and above over the past five years, industry watchers and insiders estimate. What's driving this, and how is it changing the industry?

India's top law firms are putting more women in partner and senior partner roles as they look to build 'empathetic' and 'collaborative' long-term relationships with their clients. At some firms, women accounted for almost half the promotions to the role of partner and above over the past five years, industry watchers and insiders estimate.

"A significant shift is visibly underway," said Fereshte Sethna, founder and managing partner of DMD Advocates, who has more than three decades of experience in the profession. "Even among litigators, we now see far more women in court than we did 20 or 30 years ago."

A sure way of ensuring more diversity at the top is hiring and promoting women to senior roles, firms have found. For instance, 44 women lawyers joined law firm Trilegal's all-equity partnership over the past five years, accounting for about 42% of all new partners who joined during this time.

An all-equity partnership is a partnership structure in which all partners hold an ownership stake, i.e. equity and directly share in the firm's profits and losses. Unlike non-equity partners, these individuals often have a say in major decisions.

Khaitan & Co has promoted 75 women to partnership roles since 2020, versus 170 men to senior roles. Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co has added 66 women **partners** across salaried and equity partnership over this period. It currently has 188 partners.

"While we are a merit-driven firm, there has always been an emphasis on ensuring equal opportunities for all by fostering an inclusive environment that does not discriminate on gender grounds. Women now constitute nearly 51% of our **lawyers**", said Shweta Shroff Chopra, partner, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas.

JSA Advocates and Solicitors told *Mint* it currently has 54 women attorneys in partnership and senior partnership roles. "Our overall diversity ratio is 46% and we have been able to retain it at 45% even at the partner level," said Suman Rudra, chief talent officer of JSA Advocates and Solicitors.

A typical **law firm** has partners at the top who manage lawyers, handle key clients, bring in business and oversee the firm's strategy, finances and overall success. Over the past three to four years, law firms in India have seen cut-throat poaching wars as partners have moved to rival firms with entire teams in tow. In July 2024, JSA Advocates and Solicitors hired Nisha

Kaur Uberoi, one of India's top **antitrust** lawyers, along with her team of 25 from Trilegal.

Driving the culture

According to executives, more women partners have been hired over the past five years in areas that are increasingly dominating the industry, such as corporate, banking, financing and employment, insolvency & restructuring.

A common thread at firms with women-led partnerships is their ability to keep clients engaged over long periods, experts said. To capitalise on this, some law firms are running leadership training programs to strengthen employees' strategic, managerial and interpersonal skills, along with one-on-one coaching to help women build confidence and prepare for leadership roles.

Some companies are also introducing flexible policies to encourage more mothers to join. Chopra of Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas said, "We have increased our **paternity leave** allowance to three weeks and additional childcare leave (until children are three years old) for all young parents, in addition to the statutory **maternity leave** policy for mothers, to ensure both parents can share the load of bringing up children. In addition, we have continued hybrid working (one day per week work from home), work from anywhere (two weeks a year) and caregiver leave (up to three weeks) for all our lawyers, regardless of gender".

Anupriya Anand, head of human resources at Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas (CAM) said women leaders of today typically have a different approach from previous generations, bringing inclusive, empathetic and collaborative leadership to the industry. About 40% of the promotions over the last five years in CAM were **women**, who now occupy 50% of leadership roles, she said.

Chopra of Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas echoed this view, saying, "The new generation of women leaders is shaping a more empathetic,

collaborative, balanced and inclusive approach to leadership. They bring a balance of strategic rigour and emotional intelligence and emphasise mentorship, transparent communication and partnership with clients to deliver value beyond transactions.

"This has contributed to a more open and supportive work culture that encourages diverse perspectives and nurtures talent across levels, while keeping the firm performance-driven."

Smaller firms lag

But the picture isn't this rosy for women outside the top firms, according to at least one expert. Aparna Mittal, a former M&A partner at tier-1 law firm and founder of Samāna Centre for Gender, Policy and Law, an anti-discrimination and **diversity**, equity and inclusion (DEI) firm, said second-rung law firms paint a different picture.

Some non-tier-1 law firms with 50-100 lawyers have just 5-7 women partners or even fewer, she said, adding that "in addition to numbers, the profession's real test lies in its systemic maturity—the strength of its policies, processes and exposure to equal opportunities".

She said inequality often stemmed not from overt **discrimination** but from subtle biases and systemic lapses, such as which lawyers are assigned which matters, or who gets client-facing opportunities and who doesn't. "If someone is always tasked with back-office work, they will never go to a client meeting or negotiating room. Experience is a product of exposure and opportunity," Mittal said. "Are you only sending men out for international conferences? Networking is an important area for professional growth and visibility," she added.

She emphasised that **gender diversity** shouldn't be a women-only conversation. "By asking whether women leaders are more inclusive of other women, we actually reduce the scope for male allyship. We want equality to be practiced by all, and for men to be strong allies," she said.

Grassroots change

The push for more diversity is also visible on campuses. "Today our campus batch, which ranges from 70-100 graduates a year from India's premier law firms, comprises 50% or more women, all selected on merit with no compromise on entry-level selection parameters. A large number from this talent pool has grown and will continue to grow into partnership roles," said Amar Sinhji, director human resources at Khaitan & Co. Data from Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies, Bangalore, which offers law programs, shows that the male-to-female ratio stands at 40:60 since 2020. "Over the past decade, we've seen a gradual improvement in female enrollment in law programs. The 60% figure represents a significant advancement, particularly in a profession that historically skewed heavily male", said Narayani Ramachandran, director, NMIMS Bangalore.